

THE ART OF COARSE BEEKEEPING.

We are all coarse beekeepers at times; we have observed coarse beekeeping in the last fifty years and exciting new opportunities are emerging for really coarse beekeepers today.

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We are all coarse beekeepers at times; it is often said that the number of dead bees under the edge of the crown board is in direct proportion to the defensiveness of the bees at the last inspection or the mood of the beekeeper!

Most beekeepers, in describing their early years, talk about having had defensive bees but that they acquired a docile queen and lived happily ever after; what liars and hypocrites! Why do they still wear space suits and gloves? There is no doubt that some strains of bees are more defensive than others but who has not heard the banging of bees against their veil? Yes, you wear a Sheriff veil too; the old black net veils round your straw hats do not bang! They do, of course, slip out and allow a bee inside or blow against your ear, which is one of the most painful places to be stung. Do you feel the pain just reading about it? Did you ever remove honey from a hive which was being robbed? Did you ever brush bees from a cell bar in a thunderstorm when attempting to raise queens? Both of these experiences lead to stinging and sometimes, coarse beekeeping. Coarse beekeeping is caused by ignorance, pain, fear and impatience.

My first beekeeping tutor was Tommy Johnston who taught beekeeping at Greenmount Agricultural College. He was the only teacher whom we could address by his Christian name; perhaps a measure of the status of beekeeping in the college. Beekeeping was a compulsory subject for students of Horticulture but optional for students of Agriculture. I opted for the beekeeping course even as an Agriculturalist. It was a class of about twelve, small for classroom sessions but large for open hive demonstrations. This problem was solved by the scarcity of veils. I think there were five veils in total but one or two had holes in them; a veil with a hole is worse than no veil! Students without a veil didn't always push to the front. As for gloves, there

were none. Tommy told us that it was impossible to manipulate bees whilst wearing gloves. He said that leather gloves found their way under the lugs when replacing frames and withdrawing them jolted the bees; that was a no-no with eight students around with bare faces. He also held queens for marking in his left hand, with his scissors in his right; bare hand: Marigold gloves were not around in 1953! It would be sissy to think of wearing gloves. This was the best possible training for me to learn how to handle bees gently. I would have loved to say that it was good training for the class but, since only two or three became beekeepers, the training must not have been as inspiring as I thought it was. We did have Hoffman frames, quite a novelty, but most frames had metal ends which many beekeepers fitted with the closed bits out. To remove them the first two fingers were almost cut off by the sharp bits next to the frame, coarse beekeeping indeed. We had some Abbott frames for demonstration as beekeepers then used them almost exclusively. The top bars widened out into the lugs which made the frames self spacing. Another feature of Abbott frames was that they had a wedge to hold the foundation into the top bar. This really was a wedge, not a bar to nail in as on today's frames. There were two slits on the underside of the top bar; the foundation was entered into one and a wedge, the length of the foundation was forced into the other. When assembling new frames carefully the system worked but re-waxing was sometimes problematic. It was difficult to remove wax moth from both slits and consequently the wax wasn't always entered far enough and the wedge tended to squeeze it out again. Tommy gave great attention to teaching his horticultural students the proper method of turning a frame, always keeping it in a vertical plane. He told us that, if it was held horizontally, the wedge would pull out and, if the frame was not nailed, it would disintegrate. This was not a problem for coarse beekeepers who never knew what was below the queen excluder anyway, but it was a problem for the Horticultural inspector who called and was asked to inspect the bees.

In the 1950's most beekeepers in Northern Ireland were old and had inherited the apiary and had never had any instruction. What instruction was necessary? The essentials were how to make up a section crate, how to prepare a carbolic cloth with which to remove the crate in August, and how to catch and hive a swarm. Skep beekeeping was less coarse than the methods of many of these men who had bar frames in their hives but didn't use them. It

would be unusual to find twenty year old wax in a skep! When a colony died it was most certainly Acarine as starvation was never admitted. Every coarse beekeeper knew that a carpet of dead bees outside the hive was Acarine!

Beating on a saucepan with a stick was alleged to trick the bees, in a swarm, that there was thunder around, that rain was imminent and that they had better settle quickly and not trouble the beekeeper further. The real reason for the banging was to claim ownership of the swarm and defy anyone else from attempting to follow it. The law was frequently misquoted by claiming that the person following the swarm had the right to enter someone else's property in hot pursuit. The swarm was invariably hived by dumping it on a white sheet spread on a ramp placed between the landing board of an empty hive and the ground. Watching the bees march in was, and still is, one of the magical moments of beekeeping. The true sign of a coarse beekeeper was his pride in the amount of debris the swarm removed from the empty hive, mostly comb destroyed by wax moths. I could elaborate but I still want to sell honey!

During the Second World War and for some years thereafter, when sugar was rationed, bees got an allocation of twelve pounds per colony per year. As you can imagine the bee population grew enormously and the number of beehives grew even more. If there was a row of hives in the orchard the coarse beekeeper required to have bees in the one next the gate, and cross ones at that. When the police man arrived to check the census, the hive near the gate was given a good kicking and a detailed inspection was not undertaken. Kicking would also sometimes take place when an inspector came to check for fowl brood. A good beekeeper will always manage his bees in the best interests of the bees and in the best interests of surrounding beekeepers.

Some of the practices of the coarse beekeepers in the fifties seem funny now but what do 21st century beekeepers do. Because of stinging or the fear of stinging they over protect themselves, crush bees by banging on supers or crown boards; they still let bees die of starvation and they do not replace foundation. They do not select for docility thus producing drones which will perpetuate aggression both in their own and in their neighbours' bees.

When sugar rationing ended in the fifties, and when there were severe losses from Acarine and after a few bad seasons, many colonies died out leaving

sources of AFB for many years to come. Since the eighties, coarse beekeepers have either not treated for Varroa or experimented with quack remedies and succeeded in re-infesting their neighbours who treated properly. Their empty hives are just as dangerous a source of AFB as those left empty after Acarine fifty years ago.

If you want to be a coarse beekeeper overnight then import some yellow queens from a hot country well south of here. In the first season you will have prolific queens whose offspring are docile. If it is a brilliant season you may get a crop of honey; if it is a wet season you will be disappointed in your yield. They will not winter well and may be more prone to Nosema. Your yellow drones will mate with your neighbours' queens thus undoing years of selection on his part, for docile dark bees. This crossing usually leads to defensive bees. You will get some crosses too, as your virgins could be mated with local drones. The Mediterranean bees produce large amounts of brood and bees and, if you are a coarse beekeeper, you will not recognise their larger food requirement and so loose many of them to starvation.

If you want to be a really coarse beekeeper, then smuggle in some bees from a country in which Small Hive Beetle and other exotic pests and diseases are endemic.